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Design Principles: Continue with Critiquing :Written Report

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Design_Principles_Tim Kovar: Brief_2

MADMT

Date. 7/2/2005

Tutor. Tim Kovar

Brief_2: Continue with Critiquing

Understanding of the brief:

To choose an object which is considered to be an example of good design. Using the example chosen, write a 200 word analysis about it in relation to two principles of design; aesthetic usability effect and affordance.

Deadline

14/2/2005

Handing in essay

Brief_2: Continue with Critiquing

Two principles of design; aesthetic usability effect and affordance.

A huge variety of objects have been designed and manufactured to assist people in completing the tasks associated with everyday living. For example, chairs, tables, a Swiss-army knife, a Denby mug, kitchen utensils, transport vehicles, communication tools, doors, bicycles, handles, knobs, switches, clothing, graphical user interfaces, packaging, and yes, the list is endless! From these hundreds and thousands of objects out there in the world, of which we use each day, the inanimate object: the frying pan is chosen to write about.

Aesthetic Usability Effect

“Aesthetic designs are perceived as easier to use than less-aesthetic designs”.

Aesthetics, as defined in the Collins English Dictionary, is that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the study of such concepts as beauty, taste etc. Usability is defined as ‘being able to use something’. In this case, taking the example of a frying pan. A frying pan in most instances is made up of a robust handle attached to a flat, circular metal surface on which food is placed in order to fry, or in some cases, the pan might come in handy as a weapon for self defence.

An aesthetic usability effect of an object upon a user is a very subjective thing. One does not know what experiences a user might have before they approach using an object. Objects are designed, manufactured and marketed, and there exists, to a large degree, a presumed knowledge and attributed consumer ego with regard to how objects are used. It’s like a language; when we are born we start with a clean slate and through experiences we learn. We learn to fit in. We learn how to use things. We learn from those around us. Looked upon as animal, humans differ more than any other of the species, excelling in the food chain because they have the ability to group together, to learn from each other, constantly communicating, improvising and adapting to overcome.

I learnt to use a frying pan from personal experience and by asking questions, I learnt through other people’s experiences. Although I didn’t always know how to use a frying pan, I now know how to use a frying pan. This learning approach, most likely, applies to almost every object I now know how to use. I can’t see how an aesthetic usability effect can occur where a user will know what an object is for, purely by looking at it without bringing some form of previously attained knowledge, experience and understanding. An aesthetic usability effect would, most likely, not occur unless there is some form of previous knowledge brought with the user. This is probably true because, for example, if I gave a frying pan to a very young child or to my dog, they would be more likely to try to eat it rather than fry eggs with it. So it is most likely that for the phenomenon of aesthetic usability effect to occur between user and object, there needs to be an empirical prerequisite. Once this empirical prerequisite exists, it is safe to say that in most cases, aesthetic designs are often perceived by the consumer, as being easier to use, safer, stronger and better value for money, than less-aesthetic designs. This would directly relate, in marketing terms to the concept of planned product obsolescence.

Everyday, thousands of objects have an obvious aesthetic usability effect on us as we bring some form of previously gained knowledge and experience with us when using them. We come across a vast amount of everyday things that work to do similar tasks but would be aesthetically different, including; ‘things with knobs, and dials, controls and switches, lights and meters’. Sometimes, in such cases where necessity breeds invention, we go a stage further and, based on a particular

objects aesthetics and material make-up, we apply it to an ulterior use. For example, when there isn't a screwdriver at hand to tighten a screw, say on a frying pan handle for instance, we might use a knife!

Affordance

“A property in which the physical characteristics of an object or environment influence its function”.

Donald A. Norman in his book ‘The Design of Everyday Things’ tells us that there exists ‘the start of a psychology of materials and of things, the study of affordances of objects’. He applies the term affordance to the ‘perceived and actual properties’ of an object, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how an object is used. In applying this school of thought to my own scenario, a frying pan affords (“is for”) heating food and, therefore, affords cooking. I agree with Norman in that affordances do provide strong clues to the operation of things but again let me reiterate that in most cases there must be in existence some form of prior knowledge and understanding of the object regarding its intended use. Norman also makes the point that when simple things need pictures, labels, or instructions, the design has failed. This is not necessarily true because oftentimes objects do not need an explanation regarding their use but some form of instruction or note is required by the law of the land, not because of poor design.